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Review of Kate Horgan 'The Politics of Songs in Eighteen-Century Britain, 1723-1795'

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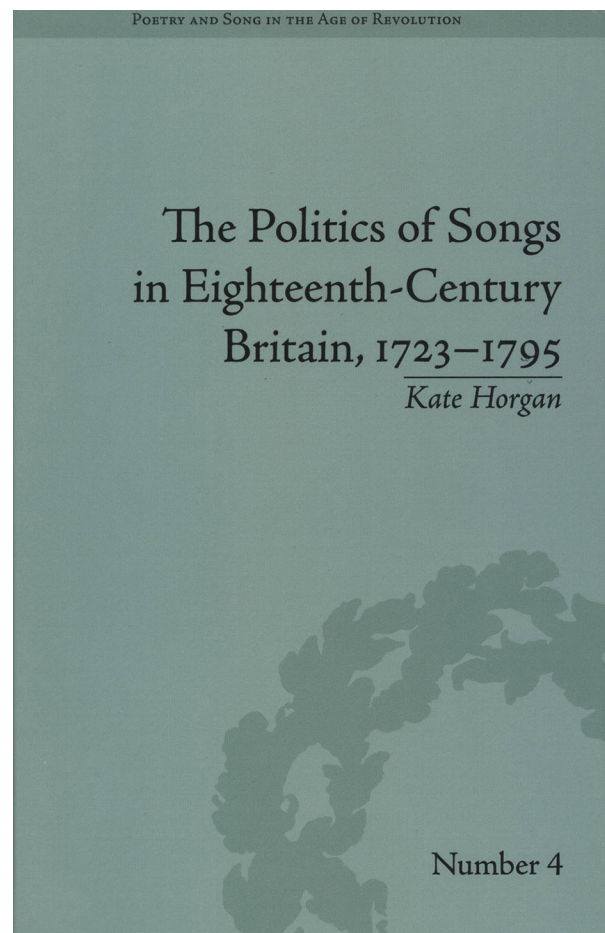
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Kate Horgan. *The Politics of Songs in Eighteenth-Century Britain, 1723–1795*. Poetry and Song in the Age of Revolution Number 4. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2014. x + 262 pp. £95.00/\$150.00, hardcover (also available as an e-book).

Reviewed by Stephen R. Millar

STEPHEN R. MILLAR (smillar25@qub.ac.uk) is a PhD candidate in ethnomusicology at Queen's University Belfast whose research focuses on political song and popular culture, stretching from broadside ballads in the Age of Revolution to contemporary football chants and the contestation of public space. He has published articles in *Echo*, *Music and Politics*, and *Scottish Affairs*.

- 1 *The Politics of Songs* combines the perspectives of literary studies and political history to tackle a broad area of inquiry. It employs the “Princely Song,” from the well-known story of Richard the Lionheart’s rescue by his minstrel Blondel, as a unifying theme through which to explore the politics of song in romantic culture. Horgan uses Plato’s warnings over the mixing of music and politics “potentially leading to the breakdown of the law and constitution” as a frame to view the interpretation of political songs during the age of revolution (18). She explains the establishment’s fear of such music, which rose during the eighteenth century and culminated in songs’ being used as evidence of high treason—later reduced to conspiracy—at the trial of Henry Yorke, and in the transportation of Thomas Muir in 1794 and imprisonment of Yorke and James Montgomery in 1795.
- 2 Horgan makes an interesting connection between the history of the psalms and Callistratus’s “Harmodium Melos,” a frequently performed classical song that served to remind the Athenians of their rights and liberties. Through the fusion of music and politics, eighteenth-century political song helped citizens articulate their plight and disseminate a—crude—political message. Drawing on the work of Maureen McLane, Horgan contends that ballads functioned in a similar fashion, defining them as a subcategory of song in opposition to the dominant narrative in which ballads are seen as being “constitutive of the poetry of the Romantic era” (23, quoting McLane), and shows how polit-



ical songs often used the melodies of psalms. In eighteenth-century Britain, psalms served as national songs and anthems. Their ubiquity facilitated their easy co-option, and the borrowing of the psalm melodies, with their religious connotations, imbued the political songs with a certain authority.

- 3 The cross-connections between psalm, song, and ballad were often mirrored by those between political activists, songwriters, and printers. Horgan recounts how Joseph Gales, a Sheffield printer of Thomas Paine’s political tracts, came to symbolize Paine himself through the zeal with which he carried out his evangelizing; Gales “sold ‘hundreds’ of Paine’s works in the shop and printed ‘thousands’ by order of the Constitutional Society” (139). When he was called upon to speak at a local meeting that ended in a dispute, his supporters carried him out while singing Joseph Mather’s “God Save Great Thomas Paine,” in another example of the conflation of politics and song whereby a secondary individual—Gales being neither author nor composer—is substituted for both, owing to his role in the mediafication of the message that Mather and Paine sought to disseminate.

- 4 The third chapter deals with Edmund Burke's changing, and seemingly contradictory, politics. Although the subject is well known to scholars of eighteenth-century Britain, Horgan delivers a refreshing treatment of Burke's attacks on Richard Price, placing particular emphasis on his use of metaphors of song. However, her attempt to draw together the "philippizing" of Price with that of the Oracle of Delphi comes across as rather forced, particularly when Burke viewed the well-meaning Price as being duped by France, as opposed to Demosthenes's charging the oracle with deliberate deception. Horgan recounts Burke's opposition to the French Revolution and to the "new Whigs" via a wonderful metaphor on the relationship between printer, song, and public in the production of cheap songbooks. These songbooks represent a challenge to aristocratic orthodoxy wherein the public's driving production through a printer overturns "authorial authority," reduces "the beauty and elegance of the type," and consigns the awarding of merit to the public "rather than through a system of patronage" (123).
- 5 The book could have benefited from more analysis of the melodies of political songs; Horgan identifies a chasm between the fields of literary studies and music, making such analysis all the more conspicuous by its absence. While deconstruction of the technical aspects of music is somewhat specialized—one of the principal reasons for the disconnect between music and other disciplines—an examination of the music accompanying these political songs would have made for a more complete and cross-disciplinary study. This caveat aside, Horgan's contribution to the scant scholarship on political songs in late eighteenth-century Britain is to be welcomed.
- 6 Although the life and work of Andrew Fletcher fall outside the timeframe indicated by the book's title, his 1704 comment that "if a man were permitted to make all the ballads, he need not care who should make the laws of a nation" is strikingly prescient.¹ Such sentiment is central to Horgan's argument that songs were an important and ubiquitous part of political, literary, and print culture in eighteenth-century Britain and were feared for their ability to spread dissent among the "lower orders" of society. Her use of songs as historical documents follows an approach similar to that of James Donnelly and Maura Cronin, who employ eighteenth-century ballads to counter claims that the 1798 Irish rebellion was free from sectarianism,² and chimes with McGann's assertion—via Nietzsche—that poetical

works are "more 'historical' than history ... because the 'history' that poems touch and re-present encompasses a far greater scale of possible, and therefore real, human times and events than the most careful and scholarly historical text."³ While students of Blake will perhaps be disappointed by his absence, the book makes reference to Thomas Gray's "The Bard," which was illustrated by Blake, as exemplary of the power of political song. More importantly, Horgan offers much on the context in which Blake operated and sets out a compelling narrative on the interconnectedness between songs, psalms, and ballads, demonstrating the role of political songs in shaping political, literary, and print culture in eighteenth-century Britain.

1. Andrew Fletcher, *The Political Works of Andrew Fletcher, Esq* (London: A. Bettesworth and C. Hitch, 1732) 372.

2. See Maura Cronin, "Memory, Story and Balladry: 1798 and Its Place in Popular Memory in Pre-Famine Ireland," and James S. Donnelly, Jr., "Sectarianism in 1798 and in Catholic Nationalist Memory," *Rebellion*

and Remembrance in Modern Ireland, ed. Laurence M. Geary (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001) 112-34 and 15-37.

3. Jerome McGann, "The Third World of Criticism," *Rethinking Historicism: Critical Readings in Romantic History*, by Marjorie Levinson, Marilyn Butler, Jerome McGann, and Paul Hamilton (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989) 105.